



Evolve To Survive

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We think of evolution as being only about change – but it’s also about repeating successful approaches and institutionalizing the adaptations that work. What works to help the species survive and thrive is passed on to the next generation. Those adaptations that make the organism less fit get weeded out over time. If a strategy doesn’t work, you die or go extinct. Your genes don’t get passed on.

Life integrates the unexpected, incorporating what we would call “mistakes.” If there were no mistakes in gene replication, there wouldn’t be the variations that have led to 30 million species in life. Elephants are the largest land mammal on the planet. They are able to be that large because of a mistake that happened in the genetic code – called a mutation – long ago. What had been smooth skin mutated into wrinkled skin, creating more surface area that could shed extra heat. This turned out to be important for a large animal living in the African desert. It allowed elephants, over many generations, to increase in size without overheating.

Changes also happen through sexual reproduction – two sets of genes coming together creatively. Both parents put in their genetic material and the offspring takes on half of each. Each organism brings their DNA – the information library of all the best they have to offer – half is implemented in the creation of their offspring, and they’re willing to let go of the other half. How willing are we to do this as leaders, with our ideas, approaches, strategies? Are we willing to risk combining the best of our own creativity while welcoming an equal contribution from another who may be quite unlike us?

We have a tendency as humans to want to plan and control everything. But if we are going to innovate the way life does, an evolutionary approach to leadership would be to try lots of things, fail fast, incorporate what works, and let go of what doesn’t. To encourage an organization or initiative to adapt and evolve, we need a set of strategies that will:

- Affirm what’s working well
- Integrate the unexpected - welcome “mistakes”
- Reshuffle information – mix it up!
- Let go of what no longer works

As a leader, how can you influence the rate of adaption to evolve towards success?